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29 August 1968

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Soviet Motives for the Invasion of Czechoslovakia

1. The final Soviet decision to invade Czechoslovakia appears to have grown out of a complex set of foreign and domestic political considerations. Many of these undoubtedly had been debated for several months as the trend of post-January developments in Czechoslovakia became clearer. There were strategic considerations involved in the possible loss of Czechoslovakia to the Warsaw Pact and the consequent removal of a key buffer state. The communist party in Czechoslovakia was losing its "leading role" with dire consequences not only for that country but for the rest of the communist world. Perhaps most frightening, the infectious freedom could spread to the USSR. Even if this seemed a rather long term threat to the leadership, the failure to act decisively to thwart it could be held against them in the much more immediate future by more militant members of the establishment.

2. There is good evidence, however, that the final decision was a last-minute one. It probably was made only on the weekend preceding the invasion, although at least the military planning involved seems to have been under way for some weeks. The meetings at Cierna and Bratislava resulted in a brief break in the rising curve of Soviet invective, but we know that the Cierna meeting, in particular, involved very tough bargaining and even tougher talk. The public smiles displayed by Brezhnev at Bratislava almost certainly concealed continuing doubts that Dubcek could be counted on to keep the Czechoslovak reform movement under control.

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3. The curve of Soviet invective rose again during the period between Bratislava and the invasion. As Czechoslovak press restraints proved relatively ineffective, increasingly explicit Soviet statements appeared to the effect that Dubcek was losing control to "counter-revolutionary" elements. The Soviet leaders went on vacation during this period, but they stayed in close touch with the situation. We are inclined to accept reports that some of the leaders were in almost daily telephone contact with Dubcek warning him in private, as the Soviet press was in public, that he was not living up to the Cierna and Bratislava agreements.

4. We cannot say which, if any, single event tipped the balance from testing and political pressure to invasion. It seems likely that the trend of post-Bratislava events in Czechoslovakia swung what was probably a close balance in the politburo in favor of invasion. The views of Ulbricht, who visited Prague, during the middle of this period were undoubtedly a factor, but almost certainly not a decisive one. There is some evidence that the weekend before the invasion was marked by lengthy discussions among the Soviet leaders conducted in what must have been a charged political atmosphere. Undoubtedly tensions were high at this time and the foreign policy calculations -- the weighing of the gains and losses that would accrue to Moscow's world position -- were influenced by considerations of personal political advantage. The results of the Kremlin in-fighting are still to be seen, however, and they will probably depend on the ultimate outcome in Czechoslovakia.

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
27 August 1968

No. 1567/68

MEMORANDUM:

SUBJECT : Soviet Foreign Policy After Czechoslovakia

1. Some time before Tuesday, 20 August, the Soviet leadership decided to put an end once and for all to the threat of an erosion of Communist power and Soviet influence in Czechoslovakia. It was the most important decision taken by a regime which, during nearly four years in power, had confined itself to small actions because it was afraid of big risks. Even this step--the invasion of Czechoslovakia--stemmed more from desperation than from determination, came after months of almost palpable agonizing, and quickly showed signs of fumbling execution because of either miscalculation or irresolution, or both.

2. There is no question but what Moscow can effectively choke off movements toward reform in Eastern Europe, but it has demonstrated that it lacks the resilience to accommodate the pressure for change in the area. The intervention in Czechoslovakia is also a victory for the men in Moscow who, in their attitude toward the non-Communist world, fear contamination more than they favor collaboration. We do not know and may not know for some time what the margin of victory was and to what extent the attitude that has won will color Soviet behavior elsewhere than in Czechoslovakia.

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3. We do not think it possible to link in any reliable way the dozen or so men who count most in Moscow to this or that attitude, nor that there are, for that matter, more or less consistent blocs of "hards" and "softs" on the whole range of foreign policy issues. The presence of separate and conflicting strains in the Soviet approach to these problems has, however, long been evident. Some of the men are more inclined to look for opportunities in the policy of "peaceful coexistence"; others are more attentive to the risks. The interplay of these tendencies within a framework of committee rule has been a hallmark of the Brezhnev-Kosygin regime and a source of persistent tension within the leadership.

4. Such differences of emphasis as these are bound to have influenced the Soviet handling of the Czech problem. No matter how much it was felt that it was Moscow's duty and right to deal with the problem as a domestic affair, it must also have been recognized that the issue had implications for Moscow's position as the paramount center of international Communism and as a great power. Although the first consideration has prevailed, it is safe to suppose that the decision and its aftermath have brought tension within the Politburo to the highest point ever. If this is so, it will not be surprising if the ruling group in its present form fails to get through many more months. But at this point it is hard to know who might be more vulnerable; those who may have urged intervention, or those who may have resented it.

5. No matter how much or how little personalities count in the shaping of Soviet foreign policy, they can only tell part of the story. By whatever means a consensus in favor of intervening in Czechoslovakia was arrived at, the Soviet leadership had to make some calculation of how this action would affect its position as a Communist state in Europe, as the patriarch of the Communist movement, and as a nuclear power confronting the US on the broadest international front. The conclusion was that Czechoslovakia must be saved whatever the cost. It may even have been supposed that this cost would be

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tolerable. These calculations, perhaps made in an overheated political and emotional atmosphere, were certainly imperfect and very possibly badly mistaken. This will have to be seen. Either way, in the short term, the USSR's position will inevitably be damaged, and probably nowhere more seriously than among other Communists.

6. After trying for the better part of 12 years to put their relations with the East European states on a more voluntary basis, the Russians have demonstrated that a half-way house is uninhabitable. Their prescription--a little bit of independence, but not too much--has been shown not to be the cure. Since they have not found the way to ensure the more or less willing consent of the East European peoples to their domination, much Soviet military power, as well as political energies and economic assets, will remain tied down in East Europe. The November conference of Communist parties, if now it takes place at all, cannot possibly do what the Soviets intended it to do: develop a new pro-Soviet, anti-Chinese front of Communist parties. Having discovered this, Moscow is likely to value all the more loyal allies like Ulbricht and to consider it all the more necessary to remain sturdy in its support of North Vietnam.

7. Communist parties outside the bloc, especially those in Western Europe, will either move further in the direction of "polycentrism" or suffer electoral blight. They will, in either case, be less able to render useful service in support of Soviet foreign policy.

8. In Europe and in the Third World, the Soviets will lose the advantage of having seemed morally superior to the US vis-a-vis Vietnam. The fears and attitudes of the high Cold War era are not likely to be revived, but the progress of the USSR's efforts to cultivate the confidence of the European nations and to reduce US influence will inevitably be checked. West Germany's Eastern policy faces new and probably insurmountable obstacles. At the same time, the prospects for early or easy acceptance of the NPT by the West Germans--as by others--have probably been set back.

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9. In the Third World the Soviet position is not likely to be much weakened immediately where it is now strong, as among the Arabs. Where it is weak, it may become even weaker. But, generally, the leaders of nonaligned nations will want to treat the Czechoslovak issue as none of their business. The vote on the Czech question in the Security Council, in which India, Pakistan, and Algeria abstained, bears witness that recipients of Soviet economic and military assistance will naturally put their own national interests before what they may consider remote, largely irrelevant conflicts between the great powers or within the latters' spheres. Nevertheless, the USSR's rough and fumbling handling of Czechoslovakia may at least cost it the loss of some respect in the Third World. And, if, as seems likely, the USSR, because of its needs in Eastern Europe, will in the future have less military and economic aid to dispense, the spread of Soviet influence may be slowed.

10. Finally, where the future of US-Soviet relations is concerned, the outlook depends to some degree on the US attitude. The idea of a mutual reduction of forces in Central Europe, as a first step toward a solution of the problems of European security, is already a casualty. Such hopes as there were for cooperation between the US and USSR in removing some of the sources of tension in the Middle East are dimmer, although it may be all the more in the USSR's interest to see that the conflict there remains mainly in the political arena. But, on the question of the Soviet position on nuclear weapons control, we cannot be sure what Soviet behavior toward Czechoslovakia portends. It may be that the economic and technological arguments for an agreement with the US are apparent to one or another degree across the whole spectrum of Soviet opinion, from militant to pragmatic. Not to be excluded also is the possibility that Moscow will see the need as greater after Czechoslovakia for offsetting steps in order to keep US-Soviet relations from settling into a total freeze.

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11. US-Soviet missile talks have, however, promised all along to be difficult. Distrust of the USSR in the US, which is bound to grow as a result of Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, combined with the defensiveness and insecurity on the part of the Russians which that action represented, will mean that any talks will now face harder going still. How the Soviets deal with this question in the days and weeks immediately ahead may be, however, the best indication of whether the cold wind blowing out of Moscow across Eastern Europe is blowing in other directions as well.

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